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RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM 0243
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000718

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PHUM MR KDEM TIP

SUBJECT: SOMEBODY'S PROPERTY: SLAVE VICTIMS TALK ABOUT
THEIR PLIGHT

REF: NOUAKCHOTT 711

Classified By: AMBASSADOR MARK M. BOULWARE FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) On November 5, PolOff had the rare opportunity to meet with nine "runaway slaves" from the Eastern city of Bassikounou in the Hodh Echargui region. These slavery victims traveled to Nouakchott at SOS Esclaves' invitation to tell their stories to UN Special Rapporteur for Contemporary Forms of Slavery Gulnara Shahinian and to request she ask for government assistance in helping them reunite with their families left behind in slavery.

¶2. (C) The group, which included four women, three men, and a toddler, shares many commonalties. Most of them do not know their age and do not have identity papers. Many were separated from their parents and siblings at a very young age and were, in turn, separated from their own children. All decided to run away after years of mistreatment, leaving their families behind in slavery. All wish they could reunite with their families. They are illiterate and poor. Although slavery is illegal in Mauritania, they are considered, by traditional standards, runaway slaves. This means that they have not been affranchised and remain, as well as their present and future children, the property of their masters.

¶3. (C) Some of their stories are as follows:

- El Khair Ould M'Bareck, approximately 18 years old, property of Bobbe Ould Nana of the Ouled Sidi faction of the Laghlal tribe, was in charge of fetching water and looking for lost cattle. He stated he ran away because he was hungry. He was able to reunite with his sister, approximately 17, and her baby boy. Nevertheless, seven members of his family, including his mother, were left behind. El Khair, a traditional slave name which means "good," wants to liberate his family and would like his master to provide compensation.

- Khoueidama Mint Barka, approximately 50 years old, property of Tawal Ayamou Ould Bonane and his brother Boy Ould Bonane of the Bourada faction of the Ouled Daoud tribe. Khoueidama ran away after years of hard work, mistreatment and humiliation. She immediately sought to look for her children, who had been separated from her at childhood. She was able to liberate one of her daughters with the help of SOS Esclaves. She left two other daughters behind, their

children (she has heard her daughters have children but does not know how many because she has not seen her daughters in decades), her sister and her niece. Khoueidama told PolOff her master had sent her a message asking her to return to pick up a document saying she was affranchised but she refused because she was afraid he would capture her. To illustrate the cruelty of her master, Koheidama said that her husband, who she left behind when she escaped, was recently forced to marry one of Koheidama's daughters from a previous marriage. "I want to go back and take all my family members but I am afraid," she stated. "It would help if the authorities could go with me to tell my master he cannot keep them." Khoueidama would like to bring her master to court. When asked whether her family members were aware of their rights, she responded "some of them do not know they are free to go."

- M'Bareck Ould Blal, approximately 50 years old, property of Louley Ould Kwatt of the Ouled Daoud tribe. M'Bareck was a camel herder and worked long days and nights caring for his master's camels. When he misbehaved, M'Bareck's master would order for him to be beaten and then tied by the neck to one of the camels used to run errands. M'Bareck, attached to the camel by the neck, was then forced to follow the camel on foot the whole day. He said he ran away because he grew tired of being mistreated. He left behind in slavery his mother, two sisters, an aunt, a cousin and his three children.

- Meryem Mint Homody, approximately 14 years old, property of Sidi Mohamed Ould Sidi Brahim of the Bourada faction of the

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Ouled Daoud tribe, does not remember her mother, from whom she was separated at two when she was sent away to the household of one of her masters' newly married daughters. Meryem worked as a house servant and took care of the young cattle. When asked why she ran away, she explained her mistress worked her to the bone and did not let her play. They had an argument and Meryem was beaten and ran away. Meryem stated her mistress sent a group of armed men to look for her but the people who took her in refused to let them take her back. She eventually found her father and went to live with him but they have not been able to contact her mother and sisters. Meryem was overcome with emotion when she told PolOff that the one thing she wants the most in life is to meet her mother and sisters.

- Mahmoud Ould M'Bareck, approximately 23 years old, property of Mohamed Sidat of the Ouled Daoud tribe, was liberated by the gendarmerie at the request of one of his cousins who told the gendarmes that M'Bareck's master used to beat him regularly. He said his master owned three other slave families.

¶4. (C) SOS Esclaves volunteer El Maaloum Ould Mahmoud, who lives in the Bassikounou area stated that, when confronted with a runaway slave, local authorities (walis, hakems, gendarmerie) refuse to conduct an investigation and apply the 2007 law criminalizing slavery. Slave-masters have never been prosecuted. "If they prosecuted somebody, the other slave-masters would become afraid and let their slaves go," he stated. The victims, he intimated, are not perceived by the authorities as victims but as troublemakers. The government does not provide any assistance; there are no social reinsertion programs to help victims integrate into society and acquire the means to live independently. Often the runaway slaves find themselves in the streets with nowhere to go. According to Mahmoud, there are more slave families in rural areas than the government cares to acknowledge. He thinks that "If they were given the opportunity to be free, they would take it. They just lack the means to be free."

¶5. (C) When asked by PolOff how could the authorities help their family members left behind, they responded "by helping

us reunite with them and asking our masters to give us a compensation."

¶6. (C) Comment: Some in the government and many among the Moor population still deny there is slavery in Mauritania. They accuse those who talk about slavery of inciting racial hatred, and wanting to enrich themselves and put themselves on the international spotlight. Nevertheless, El Khair, Khoueidama, M'Bareck, Meryem, and Mahmoud -- who have only known poverty, mistreatment and exploitation -- are the living proof that slavery still exists and that justice will not be done until the law is applied (reftel). End comment.

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